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ABSTRACT

High School and Beyond is a national longitudinal study of the 1980 classes of high school sophomores and seniors. It is part of a larger program of national longitudinal surveys commenced in 1972 by the National Center for Education Statistics. The state of Washington participated directly in the study by expanding the number of schools selected (n=50) for the national study to create valid state samples. Washington elected to survey the schools using National Opinion Research Center (NORC) materials and procedures but with state personnel and resources. To assure the validity of comparisons with the national results, NORC provided the data processing of the completed instruments. Because Washington was the only state to select this approach, the Washington High School and Beyond Study illustrates a unique example of a state's adaptation of a large-scale national survey activity. The report describes the background of the study, the focus on school-level data, the development of interviewing skills, the growing interest in the High School and Beyond data, the procedures used, concerns and problems encountered, and the benefits of interviewing as a follow-up technique. (Author/PN)

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paper and report series

No. 71 INTERVIEWING TO AUGMENT LARGE SCALE SURVEY DATA: THE WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND STORY

Alfred Nagy, Jr.

Research on Evaluation Program

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Washington State Superintendent of
Public Instruction

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PREFACE

The Research on Evaluation Program is a Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory project of research, development, testing, and training designed to create new evaluation methodologies for use in education. This document is one of a series of papers and reports produced by program staff, visiting scholars, adjunct scholars, and project collaborators--all members of a cooperative network of colleagues working on the development of new methodologies.

Is interviewing using trained volunteers a cost-effective way of providing supplemental data to increase the local relevance of national survey information? Can small-scale studies be effectively piggy-backed onto larger national efforts to increase their local utility? Based on the project described here, the answer to both these questions is yes. This project, mounted by the testing and evaluation unit of the Washington state department of education, illustrates a cost-effective way to gather supplemental qualitative and quantitative information of increased local utility by properly augmenting a national study--illustrating an important design option in this period of decreasing evaluation resources.

Nick L. Smith, Editor
Paper and Report Series

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INTRODUCTION

In 1980 the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction's Testing and Evaluation Section participated in the High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study funded by the National Center for Education Statistics and directed by James Coleman of the National Opinion Research Center. To augment the 15 Washington schools selected in the national sample an additional 50 were selected by Coleman to serve as the Washington State sample of 65 schools. Tenth and twelveth grade students in these schools were randomly selected to participate and a total of 3,645 responded to the study's questionnaires and tests. The data collection procedures called for two-person teams of professional educators to visit each of the schools at least twice: first to orient the school coordinators and students, and second to administer the questionnaires and tests and to pick up the principal's School Questionnaire. The report that follows is primarily concerned with the strategies employed for collecting information on the School Questionnaire.

The 65 item School Questionnaire, which was either mailed to the principal or delivered during the orientation visit -- allowing ample time for completion -- is the source of much descriptive information about the school and the perceptions of the principal. The intent of the School Questionnaire, beyond providing basic demographic data, was to gain useful information for conducting school effectiveness research. A preliminary editing of selected items, quickly demonstrated that the power of the data was greatly limited by confusing questions, careless responses, and frequent omissions.

The purpose of the contract between the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory was to use interviewing techniques in the sample schools to augment the School Questionnaire data, analyze the interview data, and to report on the utility of the interview

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This report was developed under a contractual agreement with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The information presented, however, does not necessarily reflect the views of that agency.

procedures. The NWREL's underlying concern was methodological -- would a relatively small effort using interview techniques expand the type of information available and increase the state and local utility and relevance of the survey data. If the effort proved useful, it would suggest 1) that local, on-site interviewing can be accomplished using trained volunteers, 2) that interview data can supplement survey data, 3) that interviewing can be a low cost strategy for increasing the utility of local data gathered for national research purposes, and 4) that "piggy-backing" a small scale study onto a larger national effort is a cost effective procedure for states and local school districts to consider.

To achieve these purposes the original School Questionnaire results were analyzed. Questions with high rates of no responses or improbable responses, along with those of special interest to the interview team, were selected as part of the interview protocol -- approximately 20 percent of the original School Questionnaire items were included. In addition, an addendum of 25 new items was developed, pilot tested, and used in the interviewing process. A group composed of nine school administrators and four members of the state's Testing and Evaluation Section was trained by the section's director. Each of the 65 schools was assigned to an interviewer, and on-site interviews were conducted primarily during May and June, 1981.

The report that follows describes the background of the study, the focus on school level data, the development of interviewing skills, the growing interest in the High School and Beyond data, the procedures used, concerns and problems encountered, and the benefits of interviewing as a follow-up technique.

BACKGROUND

High School and Beyond is a national longitudinal study of the 1980 classes of high school sophomores and seniors. It is part of a larger program of national longitudinal surveys commenced in 1972 by the National Center for Education Statistics. At this time the long-range plan for the 1980 sophomores and seniors builds on the base year data with follow-ups scheduled every two years throughout the decade.

Prior to initiating the 1980 survey, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), following recommendations from the Council of Chief State School Officers, offered each state the opportunity to participate directly in the study by expanding the number of schools selected for the national study to create valid state samples. The Department of Defense overseas schools and six states elected to do this -- California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Because of their size, five of the states needed to add only a few schools to complete state samples. These states elected to have NORC collect and analyze the data from their additional schools. Due to its smaller population, only 15 Washington schools were selected in the national sample, and it was determined that a total of 65 schools would be required for an adequate state sample.

Washington's interest in the potential information was high, but the cost of contracting with NORC to collect data from 50 additional schools was prohibitive. Therefore, Washington elected to survey the 50 schools using NORC materials and procedures but with state personnel and resources. To assure the validity of comparisons with the national results NORC provided the data processing of the completed instruments. Because Washington was the only state to select this approach, the Washington High School and Beyond Study illustrates a unique example of a state's adaptation of a large scale national survey activity.

Participation in the study was attractive to Washington for two reasons. First, the state had little information about high school students that was current and representative. Second, the Washington High School and Beyond survey would provide a rich source of information for state and local planning and decision making.

At the beginning of Washington's participation in High School and Beyond, a close working relationship was established between the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's office and the Association of Washington School Principals. The Principal's Association assisted by reviewing the survey materials, by helping to establish initial acceptance of and support for the survey, and by contracting with some of the field work personnel. In late 1980 the Bureau of School Service and Research, University of Washington, was added to the analysis team as technical advisor and computer consultant.

FOCUS SCHOOL LEVEL DATA

As outlined in the INTRODUCTION this research effort focused on the use of interviews to add to and improve the quality of the data collected by the School Questionnaire survey. The responses to the School Questionnaire are a significant part of the High School and Beyond Study because they generate a school level basis for comparing student's perceptions of their backgrounds, schooling and aspirations, as well as, their achievements. The original questionnaires completed by principals during the spring of 1980 provided information on a variety of school variables, many of which are related to the school effectiveness literature. For example, principals were asked for the numbers of students and grades served by the school, the number of books in the library, the number of days in the school year and length and number of periods in the school day. The principals also reported the type of school, programs available, classes taught, and percent of students enrolled in selected areas. The principals estimated the average daily attendance, percent of dropouts, and percent of students and faculty in minority groups. School organization, grading practices, operating procedures, school facilities, finances, and staff characteristics were described. The principals also responded to questions related to special student populations and to problems in their schools. Additionally, in 1980 when the field work was conducted the State Superintendent's office attempted to gather information regarding school organization through eight observation and interview questions on a School Organizational Survey.

Several problems became apparent after a preliminary review of the School Questionnaire responses. First, too many answers were omitted. Although there was no question that demanded knowledge beyond that held by the principal or selected members of the school staff, many questions were skipped -- few questionnaires were complete.

Second, closer inspection of item responses showed that several of the questions were frequently misread resulting in responses that were in the category of "possible but not probable." It was equally clear that the field workers had not received enough training to standardize the observational techniques relating to school organization. As a result it was difficult to distinguish among the schools based on the brief interviews and observations, hence the reliability of data was low.

Although the quality of the results of the School Questionnaire and organizational survey was disappointing in itself, there was additionally, a keen interest on the part of several Washington researchers to seek more information regarding educational practices in the sample schools. This interest focused on three general areas: staff evaluation, school organization, and decision-making practices related to the instructional program. The plan for using interviews to gain more and better data began to take shape.

DEVELOPMENT OF INTERVIEWING SKILLS

Evaluation specialists, in a variety of settings, are frequently asked to provide data which is descriptive of a particular program or setting and yet more complete than a simple inventory of "things" or responses to a written questionnaire or survey. Face-to-face interviewing offers an opportunity to enrich descriptions of programs while at the same time improving both the response rate and the validity of the responses.

The purpose of interviewing, in the present project, was to obtain a description of certain characteristics of selected high schools in Washington. Although interviewing can be quite informal, effective interviewing requires some minimum skills and practice in at least the following areas: 1) language literacy, 2) reasonable sensitivity to the persons being interviewed and their environments (in this case high schools), and 3) ability to communicate reliably the important dimensions of the responses obtained in the interviews. Good interviewing should result in a clear sense of what happens in a particular setting (i.e. high school) or how the interviewee (i.e. principal) thinks or feels about a particular issue related to the setting.

An interest in interviewing as an evaluation technique follows from the belief that it is important to know, in a more naturalistic way, about the context and processes operating in a program or setting. While the results of interviewing can provide complimentary data about a program, they do not replace other evaluative techniques. They do, however, offer additional, useful perspectives.

Further, data gathered by the interview technique have important virtues for policy making. Frequently, in making decisions in areas where competing viewpoints exist, implementation of a policy is enhanced when decision makers know both the "facts" of the situation and how important participants feel about the facts. Interviewing offers an opportunity to collect both the facts and the perceptions of the facts.

Recognizing that effective interviewing requires observation and personal interaction skills, members of the State Superintendent's staff participated in two training sessions focusing on the skills and techniques of interviewing. These training sessions included substantial opportunities for practice and made use of video taping to provide feedback to the trainees and provide opportunities for participants and trainers to critique interviewing skills and styles.

The sessions were each two days in length and were conducted on the Central Washington University campus in Ellensburg during October, 1979, and December, 1980. This setting afforded easy access to both video and recording equipment and individual interviewing rooms with one-way observation windows.

The focus of the sessions was on the development and use of interview protocols and on techniques for eliciting cooperative responses during interview sessions. Dr. Terry Denny was the seminar trainer for these sessions. Dr. Denny is the Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs, College of Education, University of Illinois, and a recognized authority in the field of interviewing methodology.

GROWING INTEREST IN USE OF HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND DATA

As the amount of information generated by national studies of secondary education grows, there seems to be a corresponding growth in the interest in using this information for additional research purposes and policy formation. The impact of the Washington High School and Beyond data clearly fits this pattern. During the original 1980 data collection, two school administrators, one a high school principal and the other a director of secondary education, asked to participate in the field work in return for access to the data for dissertation purposes.* Their offer of assistance was accepted, they were trained, and served together as one of the field teams. The success of their involvement encouraged other graduate students in educational administration to offer assistance in subsequent endeavors.

The fact that James Coleman is the chief investigator of the national phase of the study generates national, even international interest. His name is well known, his work is often controversial, and the news coverage of his recent efforts and findings lends the study a certain mystique causing both educators and the public to pay attention.

A meeting titled the Six State Seminar held at the University of Chicago in early May, 1981, gave a research team from Washington State a chance to meet and exchange ideas with Coleman and members of his National Opinion Research Center staff, representatives of the National Center for Education Statistics, and researchers and evaluators from California, Illinois, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The Washington contingent, consisting of university scholars and LEA and SEA researchers, played a central role in the meeting because Washington had conducted most of its own field work and the preliminary analysis of the Washington results was well under way. The intellectual reinforcement received stimulated the planning and implementation of the next steps.

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*At this time one of these educators had completed the doctorate and the other played a strategic role in the interviewing project being described.

Specifically the experience in Chicago reinforced the desire to follow-up on the preliminary discussions with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to correct and supplement survey data through the use of local interviews. There was no doubt that the responses to the School Questionnaire were unreliable in many instances and that steps should be taken to improve the situation. The final decision was made to interview the principals of the schools in the sample.

ORGANIZING FOR INTERVIEWING

After the return from Chicago, the call went out for field work volunteers. Two doctoral students at the University of Washington, both school administrators in secondary schools, provided special leadership in the project. One of these had been involved in the 1980 data collection; both were interested in augmenting the School Questionnaire to gain additional information for their doctoral research. With their assistance a strong cadre of educators was enlisted to supplement the efforts of the state education department's evaluation staff. All of the volunteers were school administrators, most were enrolled in doctoral studies with four universities represented.

The cooperation of their districts in providing released time for the training and interviewing in the schools was remarkable. The answer to "Why the willingness?" was based on the district level administrators sincere interest in "doing their share" to advance educational research. The importance of Coleman's involvement, the state's decision to visit the schools and collect data first-hand, and the excitement of a special study within a study as contracted by the Northwest Laboratory should not be overlooked as positive factors enlisting support.

In order to prepare for the training of the interviewers three activities had to be undertaken. First, a decision was required regarding the items from the School Questionnaire to be included in the interview schedule. Second, the additional research interests needed to be formed into questions as an addendum to the School Questionnaire. Third, the interview protocol had to be developed and tried out.

The computer at the University of Washington was programmed to print the responses to each of the 65 questions to determine the survey items that resulted in the least acceptable data, that is, to locate omissions and improbable responses. Twelve original School Questionnaire items were identified for the interviews, three were modified and included in the addendum. The identified

items typically involved numbers or had directions that were confusing, complex or ambiguous.

Additional items exploring staff evaluation, school organization, and instructional decision making were discussed, developed and organized into an addendum to the School Questionnaire. As mentioned previously this effort was implemented with the help of two University of Washington doctoral students.

An interview protocol was developed, tested and revised. Efforts were made to ensure that each interview would take less than 60 minutes, with a target of 45 minutes. The concern for reliability among interviewers led to the development of procedures for standardizing introductions, the asking of questions, and the recording of responses.

In general each interviewer was assigned four or five schools. Final assignments were made during the training session so that both proximity to the assigned schools and acquaintance with the principals could be incorporated in the final selections to save travel funds and enhance the on-site cooperation. The assignment process caused only one problem -- the volunteers were so eager that several wanted to visit more schools.

The cost of the interviewing project was low because no money was required for salaries or released time. The project's budget essentially covered travel expenses for the field workers (although for short trips, interviewers often did not seek reimbursement) and some of the costs for computer storage, tabulation and analysis of data.

CONCERNS AND PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

The use of follow-up interviews as a device for completing and expanding questionnaire data requires that attention be given to the training of interviewers. In the present situation it was necessary to review basic interviewing procedures to help assure that reliable data would be collected. Therefore a training and planning session, requiring about two hours of group effort, was conducted and proved to be extremely worthwhile. In this session, procedures for the collection of unbiased and reliable data were reviewed, along with general introductory comments regarding reasons for the research and the confidentiality assurances to be given.

An interview protocol was developed which reconstructed the scene of the data collection from the previous school year. During the interview itself, frequent reminders of the previous data collection efforts were necessary. Additionally, the interviewers had to be prepared to recognize the usual indicators of "memory gaps" so that they could probe for more accurate data. In such cases, the respondent was reminded that it was important to provide information that was as accurate as possible. By simply stating that time does tend to "soften and smooth out" incidents in one's memory, the interviewers refocused the respondents' desire to provide reliable data for the study. During the interview training session, the interviewers were also alerted to the problem of differentiating between precise numbers and wild estimates. By recognizing the "estimate cues" used by the respondent, the interviewer could then pursue a line of questioning designed to yield more precise information.

In using the interview to follow-up on questionnaire data, occasionally, some effort was required to locate the original respondent who had changed jobs since the original completion of the questionnaire. This necessitated additional time and travel costs but did not prove to be an insurmountable problem.

BENEFITS OF INTERVIEWING

A number of specific benefits accrued from the interviews with school principals -- some anticipated, some serendipitous. The most obvious anticipated outcome was the correction and/or verification of responses to selected items on the original survey. Editing of the original responses had raised questions about the accuracy of some of the information. The interviews provided the opportunity to make certain that principals understood what they were being asked before responding. The interviews also resulted in the collection of responses that had been omitted on the original surveys.

Since the interview protocols focused only on selected items from the original School Questionnaire survey, there was an opportunity to explore additional areas of interest to the State Superintendent and the teams of interviewers. Considerable interview time was focused on the principal's involvement in teacher evaluation and with the principal's responsibilities for and involvement in curriculum planning and evaluation. In both of these areas, the interviewing process was helpful in that appropriate probes or questions by the interviewer resulted in more and qualitatively better information than what could have been gathered by a written survey instrument alone.

An important serendipitous benefit of the interviewing was the very positive interaction between the field workers and the principals. Certainly, all interviewers were cordially received, but following the interviews, many principals expressed a genuine enthusiasm for the opportunity to discuss some important topics at some length with an interested and empathic listener. And since most of the interviewers were themselves practicing administrators, the interviews provided them an opportunity for new insights and perspectives about the principal's role and responsibilities.

SUMMARY

Although minor problems arose in using interviewing techniques to augment the survey data, the face-to-face strategies generally worked well. The relatively small effort did result in the generation of more accurate and additional information for research and policy analysis at the state and local levels.

The study clearly demonstrated that local school administrators and graduate student volunteers can be trained to conduct productive on-site interviews. The training in this instance focused on a major concern for reliability. The interview team reviewed the items to be included in the interviews and together agreed on the intent of the question, data desired, range of probable responses, problem areas, and special probes or procedures required. The training was adequate for the task, but in retrospect a short session on the "theory" of interviewing and a written summary of the group's agreement on the treatment of each item would have been helpful.

The interviews did improve the quality and completeness of data generated by the original paper and pencil survey. Verification probes were used to gain answers to questions frequently omitted on the survey and to double check the accuracy and appropriateness of responses to complex questions calling for descriptive detail.

Interviewing can be a low cost strategy for collecting data. By making the data available for graduate student researchers, by training and working with volunteers who have an interest using the data or gaining new skills, by dividihg the total effort into manageable parts, by assigning locations with care -- interviews were conducted efficiently and effectively in 65 high schools scattered across the state. Perhaps the greatest problem encountered was the time consuming chore of actually scheduling interviews.

The reduced costs of materials and technical assistance, the resulting mass of research and policy data, and the excitement of involvement strongly reinforce the advantages of state and local agencies coordinating with, "piggy-backing' on, major national investigations.